

Edible plants in public landscapes in greater London

*An investigation of the attitudes and
approaches of a group of landscape
managers*

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*Dissertation submitted as part requirement
for BSc (Hort) Writtle College
March 2012*



In urban settings, food growing is often “out of sight”, in private or semi-private space

Background

- Established convention for public landscaping in the UK – largely ornamental
- At the same time:
 - Growing interest in urban agriculture
 - Mounting pressure within global food system
 - Increased public interest in food growing

Examples of the use of edible planting in public spaces

- In the UK and overseas
- Highly “ornamental”, established landscapes
- But also, in public parks
- And other settings....



Ornamental potager, RHS Rosemoor,
Devon



Jardins de Villandry, Loire Valley, France



But when you look more closely.....



Potager in Grant Park, Chicago



UK parks: eg Castle Park, Bristol (and others in London, Brighton and Hove, Harrogate)



Atlanta Botanical Gardens – Edible Garden



Living Herb Wall, Atlanta Botanical Garden



Queen Elizabeth Hall Roof Garden, South Bank, London



Queen Elizabeth Hall Roof Garden and Cafe,
South Bank, London

Rationale

- Significant influence exerted by the preferences, attitudes and decisions of landscape managers
- But little research or systematic enquiry into attitudes and approaches in this area, directly involving the *managers themselves*

Aim of study

- To explore the attitudes and approaches of a group of landscape managers to the inclusion of edible plants in public landscapes
- In the Greater London area
 - Explored the ***benefits*** perceived by the managers
 - Ascertained the ***challenges*** and how they might be overcome
 - Identified ***practical considerations***
 - Ascertained the ***public response***
 - Developed ***hypotheses*** for further research

Research method

- In-depth semi-structured interviews (1.5-2 hours each)
- Seven managers responsible for a wide range of publicly accessible landscapes in greater London, including
 - The Royal Parks
 - Three local authorities
 - One English Heritage property (Eltham Palace)
 - One National Trust property (Osterley Park)
 - One community garden (Dalston Eastern Curve Garden)
- Data analysis
 - Systematic categorisation of all statements into themes

Key findings: existing public landscapes containing edibles in greater London

- A wide range of schemes found:
 - fruit and nut trees in streets, parks, orchards and civic spaces
 - Allotment-style gardens
 - Herb beds
 - Mixed ornamental and edible schemes
 - Other (eg exotics)
- Directly managed by interviewee's organisation
OR managed/maintained by community groups
or individuals



St James's Park Allotment Garden



Dalston Eastern Curve Garden, Hackney



Ornamental Vegetable Plot, Osterley Park
(National Trust)



Edible Golden Lane, City of London

Findings: inception of edible plantings

- Response to community request or consultation, or public demand
- Change in management approach
- Management interest/utilise management knowledge
- A spirit of experimentation
- A drive for distinctiveness

Findings: purpose of edible planting

1. Provide formal and informal educational resource
 2. Demonstrate food growing
 3. For community use and to develop community cohesion and participation
 4. Act as a talking point and generate debate
 5. Communicate environmental and other messages
 6. Influence policy makers and other public space managers
 7. Extend the season and provide an element of surprise
 8. Increase visitor footfall
 9. Generate new developments, events and activities
- (not to grow food in or of itself as an aim....)*

Future plans: four out of seven were open to, or expecting or hoping to increase the range of edible plantings under their management

Findings: key challenges to implementation

- **Historic landscapes and established uses**
 - Constraint of historic landscape protection
 - Land availability and siting considerations
 - Community engagement and managing expectations
 - Ways to overcome constraints included temporary, reversible schemes, previously un-utilised sites, replacement of ornamentals with edibles
 - Greater risk taking?
- **Mindsets and approaches**
 - Gravitate towards established norms of ornamental horticulture
 - Resistance as public demand and interest grows?
 - But managers comfortable with use of edibles – scope and opportunity to raise profile and extend
 - Greater risk taking?

Findings: key challenges to implementation

- **Resources for set up, management and maintenance**
 - Very wide-ranging initial investment levels
 - Need for more flexible management and more intensive resourcing
 - Reducing or eliminating food production requirement
 - (No appetite for) exploiting the economic potential through commercial schemes
 - Volunteer labour (six out of eight schemes)
 - Partnership as a resource
- **Need for knowledge, skills and experience**
 - Relevant to edibles (four out of seven interviewees)
 - And volunteer and community coordination skills
 - Greater risk taking: private garden experience?

Findings: key challenges to implementation

- **Land contamination** (three out of seven interviewees)
 - More research needed into the effects on human health of consuming food produced in urban soils
 - Is the perceived risk higher than the real risk?
 - Workable strategies: raised beds, planters and containers, ground barriers, ground level changes
- **Shade in urban environments** (two interviewees)

Findings: outcomes of edible schemes

- **Benefits to the organisation**
 - Eg economic benefits, publicity and goodwill, focal point for community gardening
- **Aesthetic outcomes**
- **No significant incidence of theft and vandalism**
- **Other opportunities and developments**
 - Events
 - Other edible schemes eg Regent's Park Allotment Garden



Regent's Park Allotment Garden

Findings: outcomes of edible schemes

- **Community cohesion, connection and engagement**
 - Educational benefits
 - “joy and surprise” in an imaginative, interactive landscape
 - “Active” visitor observation and involvement
 - Starting off conversations
 - “Discovering” and harvesting food
 - Challenging “conceived wisdom”
- **Public response to edible plantings**
 - Very positive (four interviewees)
 - Generated questions
 - Staff and volunteers – enjoyment
 - No formal user surveys

Findings: implications for urban agriculture

- No evidence of inclination towards major expansion of food-growing areas or large-scale urban agriculture (commercial or otherwise)
- May be challenging to find public space for large-scale urban agriculture
- In absence of major external pressure, will require political and policy change at national, local and organisational level if food production is to be significantly increased
- London only....but perhaps other places too?

Findings: edible planting for community engagement, cohesion and connection

- At the heart of most of the schemes was the idea of *community*
- Immediacy and relevance of food to people
- Potential power of edible planting to surprise and delight, enhance community cohesion and connection across diverse groups, and generate community conversation
- Limitations of research

Before



After

The Edible Bus Stop, South London

“such was the fervor and eagerness of the local residents that they organised a local street party in August to celebrate the opening and blossom of the Edible Bus Stop, and neighbours have started to help each other with their own gardens. The Bus Stop has literally opened doors on the street”

(local resident and organiser)



Conclusions

- Do further research
- Learn from and build on successful experiences
- Encourage creativity and flexibility in the use of public space
- Change mindsets, approaches and intent of landscape managers – greater risk-taking
- Develop and share knowledge on traits and performance of edibles in public settings
- Rebalance priorities eg historic authenticity, ornamental traditions
- Critical mass of confident and enthusiastic practitioners could play a vital part: maybe they are there?

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- Slide 5 Peter Earl, RHS Rosemoor, on Plant Network
<http://plantnetwork.org/proceedings/west-dean-2010/the-potager-at-rosemoor/>
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<http://www.cityfarmer.info/2009/12/20/vegetable-garden-at-cook-county-jail-in-chicago/>
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<http://www.sustainablebristol.com/topics/food/page/2/>
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<http://fayettewoman.com/skyhigh-atlanta-botanical-gardens-canopy-walk.html>
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<http://www.geograph.org.uk/photo/1036563>
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<http://www.landezine.com/index.php/2012/01/making-space-in-dalston-by-j-l-gibbons-landscape-architects/>
- Slide 21 Andy Eddy (private collection)
- Slide 22 Hozelock
<http://blog.hozelock.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/41-Edible-Golden-lane.png>
- Slide 29 Friends of Regent's Park
<http://www.friendsofregentspark.org/newsletter67.htm>
- Slide 33
http://article.wn.com/view/2012/04/30/TRAFFIC_ADVISORY_Watch_for_closed_lanes_in_Sarasota_County/
- Slide 34 The Balcony Gardener
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